

THE WORLD'S BEST SHORT FICTION

A GAME POSTPONED--By Gertrude Smith

It had been snowing for two days, and now the snow-plows were out, and the first really good sleighing of the winter would begin.

The great fields lay in unbroken whiteness. The woods along the banks of the Iowa River were billows of snow. The large farm-houses, and the number and size of the barns and other outlying buildings, gave evidence of the richness of the soil that lay buried and resting for another harvest.

Judge Hilton's house had the distinction of being built of brick. There was a dignity in its solidity over the usual white frame-houses on the surrounding farms that well became the dignity of the judge.

The judge was New England born and bred. There is the veneration of Puritan ancestry in the entirely Western soul that the Puritan mind still has for good old English blood.

Isabel Hilton was her father's housekeeper and only child. The mother had died while she was a baby, and she had ruled the house and been ruled by her father since that time.

She had all her father's reserve and pride of family, and at the same time his happy nature and gracious manner, that won her friends when she desired to make friends. Those who found it impossible to win their way into her favor called this reserve in Isabel—her "down East airs." There was a discouraging belief among the young men in the country around, some of whose fathers owned farms and herds of cattle large enough to divide and establish them in enviable beginnings, that if the judge thought any of them worthy to win his daughter's love there would never be an opportunity to gain the consent of the young lady.

The judge had theories against Isabel's entertaining young men alone, nor would he permit her to go with any escort but himself.

The privilege of spending the evening with Isabel, in the presence of her father, was considered a mark of distinction, and held the one so honored on the wave of hope.

"If a fellow had the backbone to outsit the judge some night, he might propose to the daughter," was the comment Mr. Holderman made to his son one day. Clint Holderman had been one of Isabel's most persistent admirers.

"The trouble with all of you is, you go there shaking in your boots, and talk to the judge, and come away with the big head because you dared do that; but I tell you, if I was a young fellow I'd outsit him if I sat till the break of day. It's some such pluck as that the judge is looking for. He raised her, and he knows her value; and she ain't going cheap to none of you. If you can go in ahead of the other fellows and tow her in, I'll give you ten thousand dollars and deed you a section of land. Come, now, let's see what you're made of!"

In some way this lordly promise got adrift the current of country gossip, and roused the admirers of Isabel, one and all, to new interest in the contest. Large stories were told of the late hours the judge, so he was sure of his welcome; but to-night he looked

Clint Holderman drove over to the brick house early on the evening that he had set his mind with flint-like determination to give his father's advice the trial.

It was a cold night, and as he sped along in his new cutter, drawn by a handsome span of black horses, and well tucked in with buffalo-ropes, his heart was warm with hope.

He had spent many evenings of the winter playing chess with the judge, so he was sure of his welcome; but to-night he looked beyond all this. He thought of the hour when, at last, with his heart and understanding touched, the judge would bid them good night, and he should be left alone with Isabel.

There was no handsomer young man in the country than Clint Holderman; none who danced better, or who drove better horses; but more than all this, the judge had repeatedly told him that he had never known a man who played a better hand at chess.

This was an encouragement indeed; for if the judge had a weakness, it was for chess, and it would be decidedly pleasant to have a son-in-law who could be to him such a ready source of entertainment. As he drove into the yard, the judge came out on the side piazza.

"Good evening," he called out. "Just drive on to the barn; the man will put out your horses."

"Snapping cold, but splendid sleighing," the judge said, while Clint was pulling off his overcoat in the hall.

"Yes. I believe my ears are touched," Clint answered, rubbing them.

"Isabel is popping some corn. She'll be glad you happened over to help eat it."

Isabel was on her knees before an open wood fire, shaking a corn-popper.

The lamp had not been lit, but the firelight made the room bright and cozy.

"Isabel, here is Mr. Holderman, my dear."

She sprang up.

"I didn't hear you come in. Good evening. Come over here by the fire. Why, it's Clint!" she said, as he came into the glow.

"I thought father meant your father. I never think of you as Mr. Holderman. Have some corn."

She held the popper open before him. "I'm sure I never think of you as Miss Hilton," he said, plunging his hand into the corn, and laughing. "That would be a little too much like strangers, as long as we've known each other."

The judge cleared his throat.

"I have always decidedly disliked the informality of country people in calling every one by their Christian names," he said.

"It leaves no degree in intimacy. But I suppose it is impossible to know where to draw the line."

Isabel went back and knelt before the fire again.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, shaking the popper vigorously. "As long as it is a custom, I don't think any one feels it a mark of special intimacy, and so the custom is protected by being a custom."

The young man sat awkwardly in his chair and was silent. He might have of closer intimacy with the family.

They seemed to be closing the doors against any thought he

The judge left the room for a moment, and came back with a lighted lamp and placed it on the claw-legged table in the center of the room. He had put on a long dressing-gown faced with crimson quilted silk, and now he drew his great chair up before the fire, and stretched himself out in it.

"Come, Clint, I will let you shake the popper for me, and I'll go down cellar and get some apples." Isabel looked at him with merry twinkle in her eyes, as she held the handle toward him, and then ran out of the room.

Clint grasped the handle of the popper with the delight of success flooding his veins. Isabel had never before given him a reason to believe that she cared for him that could compare with that look.

Daylight would find him sitting right there, but he would sit at the judge's watch, and gain the opportunity of speaking to her.

It was a delightful evening. The judge partook of the popper, and the conversation was more than usually affable and entertaining.

Isabel sat on the opposite side of the fireplace, and crocheted a blue wool scarf. There were pink spots burning her cheeks, and her eyes were very sweet.

The time passed on until the noisy clock on the mantel clearly and forcibly announced the hour of ten.

It had been comparatively easy this far, but now was the time when Clint usually went home.

The real contest was about to begin.

The judge shoved his chair back to the table, picked up a paper, and began to read.

From time to time he glanced over the top of his paper at the young man, but still read on.

When the clock struck eleven he threw the paper down, pulled his chair back to the fire, and drew the young man into an animated political discussion.

Isabel stirred about the room, putting things in order for the night.

It was nearing midnight. For the last fifteen minutes the conversation had begun to lag.

There were cold moments of complete silence.

"Had you noticed that I had traded horses?" Clint asked in a painful pause.

"No, have you?" Isabel asked, coming forward with interest.

"Yes; I've traded the grays for George Merwin's blacks. Of course there was considerable to boot. They go like the wind in a new cutter."

"I should think they would," Isabel drew a deep breath. "I like black horses. I never cared for gray ones. I always

used to look for a red-headed girl," she laughed. "I should think you'd always be on the outlook for one when you see behind them."

"Perhaps Mr. Holderman is looking for a red-headed girl," the judge said, with a queer look in the direction of the young man.

"There's a superstition that a red-headed girl has a violent temper. Now that isn't always true," he said after a moment's

pause, in which his thought seemed to have been far away. "Isabel's mother had as sweet a disposition as any woman that ever

lived, and her hair was the color of that deep flame there."

Isabel was leaning on the back of her father's chair. "Why, father, you've always said my hair was almost the color of mother's. I'm sure no one would think of calling mine red."

"I don't know about that," the judge laughed; "and I don't know about the temper, either," he added, reaching up and pinching her cheek.

"I never liked red hair, but I'm sure I don't believe in that sign," Clint said clumsily. He gazed fixedly into the fire, and felt as though he were turning to stone.

The clock struck twelve with a resonant, defiant stroke, as though it understood the contest in which it held the stakes,

When they met again it was before the fire in the sitting-room at the brick house, where they had held the hours the night before. But the contest with the judge had lost its seriousness.

Between them he sat, imperturbable, as he had sat the night before; but to-night he was only an amusing barrier, and no serious obstruction. Love had leaped the bounds, and was free to triumph in their eyes as they looked across him, and at him, smiling knowingly at each other.

"We're going to have a dance over at our house Saturday week, and an oyster supper. It is going to be a celebration of great event in our family," Clint announced with a meaning gesture to Isabel.



and refused to commit itself as to whose side would win.

At a quarter past twelve the judge stood up. Clint felt his heart beating wildly. The moment of triumph was at hand.

The judge crossed to the bay window at the other end of the room. Isabel's eyes followed him nervously.

From one side, among the geraniums and ivy, he drew the chess-table, and pushed it before him toward the fire.

"I think it would be pleasant for us to have a game of chess," he said affably.

Clint sprang to his feet.

"Oh, thank you, sir. I think I must be going home."

"Oh, must you? Well, come over again, and we'll get at it earlier in the evening."

It seemed hours before Clint finally found himself out on the smooth, snow-beaten road, spinning along toward home.

He would have been completely wretched in his defeat if it had not been for that look in Isabel's eyes when she handed him the corn-popper. He could endure his father's ridicule, and wait his time, remembering that look.

And so he made a good story of it at breakfast the next morning, and added, elevating his voice above the roaring laugh of his father and the shrieks of his mother and sister:

"Never you mind. The judge isn't through with me yet. I've only fired my first gun. I'll own when I came out of the house I was out of shot, but I haven't given up the fight yet."

"Oh, you'll let some other bantam rooster carry her off. I guess I'm safe enough on the cash and land I promised you," his father answered with a provoking laugh.

"Don't you count on it," Clint said, springing up from the table with fire in his eyes. "I'm not downed yet, I tell you."

"All right, sonny; we'll give a big dance to celebrate your engagement and an oyster supper. I suppose there's no rush about ordering the oysters?"

"I'll hold you to that," Clint said, bringing his fist up against the door. "If the thing's settled by Saturday week, we'll have the dance. If it isn't well, it won't be. I'm going over to town after the mail."

He turned and went out of the room. As the door closed, he heard his sister say, titling:

"Clint has about as hard a time courting Isabel as you had courting mother."

This was a warm thought of comfort to him. At least Isabel had never denied him her love, and he knew that his mother had been hardly won.

It was a bright winter morning. Before him was a clear stretch of road to the Iowa River, three miles away.

The white fields on either side sparkled in the sunlight. The great drifts, rolled up along the fences, looked blue in the shadows of their fantastic terracings. The sleighing never was better.

All at once Clint heard the noise of sleighbells, and a voice called to him, "Give me the road!"

He turned, and saw Isabel Hilton coming toward him, driving her own bay ponies at a fearful rate.

Clint drove quickly out at one side of the road, and she sped by him.

He saw that her horses were running away.

There had been no alarm in Isabel's face, though she was holding the reins with all her strength, and had looked neither to the right nor the left as she passed him. If there was one thing more than another that the Holdermans prided themselves in, it was their knowledge of a good horse and splendid horsemanship.

Isabel Hilton's love of horses and her daring in driving them had been one of the first things that had won Clint's admiration.

Her control and courage now appealed to him tremendously. His own horses seemed to have caught the spirit of the runaway pair ahead, as they flew along over the snow after them.

Clint knew that any moment Isabel's slight arms might lose the power to hold those tense reins so securely, and the horses dash to one side, and the crash-come, and there was nothing he could do.

On went the cutter ahead of him, swaying to the left and the right, but still keeping the road. The bridge across the Iowa River was just ahead. Clint thought of the bridge with terror. If the cutter swayed to one side, as it was doing now, the crash would come on entering.

He saw Isabel's strength tightening on the reins, and knew that she felt the danger.

Her horses flew up the slight incline to the bridge, and Clint braced his nerves to withstand the shock. But, to his amazement, he saw that the horses were slowing up and entering the bridge with all the respect of well-trained horses; and by the time they were over the frozen current below they were walking as quietly as though they had decided on that point as the end of their excitement.

Clint entered the bridge as Isabel was leaving it. She drove out to one side of the road, and waited for him to come up to her.

"If let you go on ahead of me now, if you want to," she called out as he stopped.

"Look here," Clint called back, "did you think of those horses stopping at the bridge that way, I'd like to know?"

"Yes; didn't you? I knew they might not, but I thought they would if I could keep them in the road. Didn't you think of their doing it?"

"Well, no. I had something else to think about," he answered, looking at her admiringly.

Isabel's face flushed, but she looked at him smiling.

"I wasn't afraid as long as the road was clear, but I should have lost all courage if I had seen a team coming."

"Talk of pluck!" Clint said, driving a little nearer to her cutter.

"Isabel, what did you think of last night? What did you think of me, anyway?"

She drove out into the road ahead of him, and then looked back over her shoulder, laughing. "I thought, if you had only waited half an hour longer I would have been eighteen. It is my birthday to-day. I'm of age." And with that she touched her ponies with the whip, and kept well ahead of him all the way to the village.

"What's the event you're celebrating?" the judge asked, looking over his spectacles.

"Well, that's something of a secret until to-morrow. I hope I can tell you then. You must be sure and come. We're going to have a great time."

The judge looked at Isabel. "Do you think we can go, my dear?"

Her cheeks were rosy. "Why, yes; I should think we could, father."

"Thank you, then; we'll come," the judge said, leaning back in his chair, and looking at the ceiling. "And now would you like to play that game of chess we didn't have last night?"

It was evident he had no intention of giving up the field. Clint did not answer. He was not as fearless of the judge as he had supposed. His heart throbbed excitedly.

Isabel pressed her hands together hard, and looked into the fire. The clock ticked loudly, emphasizing the silence.

Finally the judge brought his eyes from the ceiling, and looked at the young man.

"Didn't you hear what I said to you?" he asked, running his hand through his forelock, and grasping the arm of his chair.

"Yes, sir, I did," said Clint, respectfully.

"Well, then?"

"If you'll allow me to say it, sir, I think I've won the game already."

"What's that?"

"I believe, sir, I've won the game."

The judge glared at him for a moment, and then his eyes fell on Isabel.

"Well, my boy," he said, drawing a deep breath—the tears had started to his eyes—"I don't know but you have." He held out his hand. "I don't know but you have, my boy."

"Thank you, sir; thank you."

Her father reached the other hand to Isabel, and stood up and drew her into his arms; then pushed her from him, and crossed the room to the door leading into the hall.

He turned and looked back at them and smiled.

"Well, children, I'm feeling a little tired to-night," he said, "and I think, if you'll be kind enough to excuse me, I'll go to bed."

He went out and shut the door.

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